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MR. GARLAND'S BOOKS*

BY W. D. HOWELLS

THE life of any man of letters who has lived long with strong convictions becomes part of the literary history of his time, though the history may never acknowledge it. Or, if the reader will not allow so much as this, then we may agree that inevitably such an author's life becomes bound up with that of his literary contemporaries, especially his younger contemporaries. He must have been friends or foes with nearly all of them; in the wireless of print, whether he ever met them otherwise or not, he must have exchanged with them flashes of reciprocity or repulsion, electrical thrills, which remain memories after they have ceased to be actual experiences. Shall I own at once that in this abstract case some such relation was concrete in me and the author of these admirable books; that he is the younger contemporary and I the man of letters who has lived long with strong convictions?

I suppose we were friends in the beginning, and never foes, because he had strong convictions too, and they were flatteringly like mine. When we first met, twenty years ago or more, in a pleasant suburb of Boston, there was nothing but common ground between us, and our convictions played over it together as freely and affectionately as if they had been fancies. He was a realist to the point of idealism, and he was perhaps none the less, but much the more, realist because he had not yet had time to show his faith by his works. I mean his inventive works, for he was already writing radiant criticism in behalf of what he called veritism, a word he had borrowed, with due thanks, from a French critic whom he was reading with generous devotion and talking

** Main-Travelled Roads; Other Main-Travelled Roads; Money Magic; Rose of Dutcher's Coolly; The Captain of the Gray-Horse Troop; Cavanagh—Forest Ranger; The Eagle's Heart; Hesper.*

into any body who would hear him. There were as yet only a few years between him and the Wisconsin farm which grew him as genuinely as if he had been a product of its soil. He was as poor as he was young, but he was so rich in purposes of high economic and social import that he did not know he was poor. Some day, perhaps, he will himself tell the tale of that struggle to make both ends meet, the artistic and the economic ends, in those Boston days, and by teaching and lecturing to earn the time that he wished to spend in literature. He gladly wrote in the Boston newspapers for nothing, and in the best of them he was given the free hand which was far better for his future than a conditioned salary could have been. As to his present, he was such an ardent believer in Henry George's plan for abolishing poverty that with his heart and hopes fixed on a glorious morrow for all men he took no thought of his own narrow day.

He seems at that time to have gone about preaching Georgism equally with veritism in the same generous self-forgetfulness. A large public, much more intelligent than the public which reads novels instead of listening to lectures, already knew him, but I was never of this worthier public so far as hearing him speak was concerned, while we continued of the same thinking about fiction. When we both left Boston and came to New York, neither of us experienced that mental expansion, not to call it distension, which is supposed to await the provincial arriving in the metropolis; we still remained narrow-mindedly veritistic. This possibly was because we were both doubly provincial, being firstly Middle Westerners, and secondarily Bostonians; but for whatever reason it was he had already begun to show his faith by his works, in those severely conscientious studies of Wisconsin life, which I should not blame the reader for finding the best of his doing in fiction. But it is not necessary to make any such restriction in one's liking in order to vouch one's high sense of the art and the fact in *Main-Travelled Roads* and *Other Main-Travelled Roads*. The volumes are happily named; these highways are truly the paths that the sore feet of common men and women have trodden to and fro in the rude new country; they are thick with the dust and the snow of fierce summers and savage winters. I do not say but they lead now and then through beautiful spring-times and mellow autumns; they mostly seek the lonely

farmers, but sometimes they tarry in sociable villages where youth and love have their dances. I do not think that I am wrong in taking "The Return of the Private" and "Up the Coolly" for types of the bare reality prevailing with the hot pity which comes from the painter's heart for the conditions he depicts.

At the time he was telling these grim stories of farm life in the West—that is, in the later years of his Boston sojourn—our author was much in contact with that great and sincere talent James A. Hearne, whom it was a dramatic education to know. So far as one influenced the other I do not think Mr. Garland owed more to Hearne than Hearne to him in practising in their art the veritism which they both preached. If I may confess a dreadful secret, I suspected them both at that time of being unconsciously romantic at heart, and only kept to reality because they did not know unreality. Hearne, in spite of such cunningest pieces of excelling nature as "Margaret Fleming" and "Drifting Apart," was often tempted to do the thing that was not—beautifully not, as Mr. James might say—in his other plays, and was willing to please his public with it, for of course the thing that is not will mainly please any public. I have no doubt the author of these books did very greatly help to stay the dramatist in his allegiance to the thing that was, while on his part Hearne doubtless helped his younger friend to clarify his native dramatic perception. At any rate, some plays relating to the nearer and farther West which Mr. Garland wrote in the heyday of his Hearne friendship (it lasted to the end of the great player's life) may have been inspired by his association with a man who was to the heart of his true humanity essentially representative. As both were secretly romantic a little, so both were openly idyllic a good deal. Of course Mr. Garland's treatment of country life is more direct, more authentic, more instructive, and there is pretty sure always to be a thrill or a throe of indignant compassion in it which the milder poet did not impart to his hearers. Some plays which the novelist wrote at this time (notably "Under the Lion's Paw," a tragedy of Far Western farming) expressed this compassion, still more directly and explicitly than the stories of *Main-Travelled Roads*, and I believe it the loss of our theater that they have never got upon the stage.

But no doubt fortune that kept him to the story written

to be read was not so unintelligent as her enemies might like to imagine. In the invention of such a group of novels as *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, *The Eagle's Heart*, *Hesper*, *The Captain of the Gray-Horse Troop*, *Money Magic*, and *Cavanaugh* he has justified the constancy of purpose which the fickle goddess has shown in his case. She seems to have known what she was about in guiding his talent from West to Farther West, from the farms to the wilds, and liberating it to the freer and bolder adventure which he must always have loved.

If the work seems to lose at times in closeness of texture on its westering way, it gains in breadth. The workman does not change in it; he is always what he was: mindful of his own past, and tenderly loyal to the simplest life, as embracing not only the potentialities but the actualities of beauty, of sublimity.

Mr. Garland's books seem to me as indigenous, in the true sense, as any our country has produced. They are western American, it is true, but America is mostly western now. But that is a question apart from the question of the author's literature. I for my part find this wholesome and edifying: I like being in the company of a man who believes so cordially in man's perfectibility; who believes that wrongs can really be righted, and that even in our depraved conditions, which imply selfishness as the greatest personal good, teaches that generosity and honesty and duty are wiser and better things. I like stirring adventure without bloodshed, as I find it so often in these pages; I like love which is sweet and pure, chivalry which is in its senses, honor for women which recognizes that while all women ultimately are good and beautiful some women are better and beautifuler than others, and some are more foolish and potentially vile enough to keep the balance of the virtues even between the sexes.

This brings me to the question of something in the author's work which I suppose has given question of its advantage to other readers as well as myself. It is something which deals with character rather than incident, and has nothing of that bad allure of so much modern fiction in its dances of the seven veils. It puts the gross passions, the propensities to shame, rather than flatters or entices them; but it doesn't recognize the beast in the man's desire of the woman, the satyr leer which is the complement of the lover's

worship. In *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, in *Hesper*, in *Money Magic*, measurably in them all, you find the refusal, when it comes to the fact, to ignore what cannot be denied. I am old-fashioned, and I have moments when I could wish that the author had not been of such unsparing conscience. That is all, and with this wish noted I can give myself to the entire pleasure which the purity and wholesomeness of his fiction offers me.

There is an apparent want of continuity in his work. He has ventured from the open day at times into the mystical regions of old night, but the books here are an unbroken series in which the average West and Far West may behold itself as in a mirror. There is throughout, and in spite of everything, a manly and hopeful belief in the perfectibility of man and things. Indians, soldiers, woods, waters, he teaches me that they may all be considered to the national advantage. He does not allow me to despair of the hero, even of the heroine; he finds me new sorts of these in every sort of people and persuades me that they may still be naturally and charmingly in love with one another. He paints me a West in which the physiognomy of the East has put on new expression, kindlier, gentler, truer; he makes me imagine a life out there which has been somehow pacified and humbled and exalted as an escape from death and restored in gratitude to new usefulness in that new air on that new earth. He holds me with his story and he will not let me go till he has taught me something more than he has told me. Greater than this I do not think we ought to ask of any, and if we do I am sure we shall not get it.

At the end of my praise I feel that I should leave it largely unspoken if I did not specify the power with which certain characters and characteristics are enforced in this book and in that. With some hesitancy I choose *Money Magic* as possibly the most masterly of the author's books. More than any other since the stories of *The Main-Travelled Roads*, it expresses constancy to his old young ideal of veritism. He has not hesitated to take clay from the "rude breast of the unexhausted West," and he has molded it in shapes which breathe as with a life of their own like Bertha and Mart Haney (Marshall Haney); she the young, beautiful wife and he an old broken gambler, are heroine and hero on their own plane, where they may stand with the creations of great modern fiction. The make as well as the manner

of the uneducated girl, derived from New England and bred on the frontier, but not with all her slang and Far Western freedom underbred, is not more credibly portrayed than the rough Irishman who has outlived the saloon-keeper and desperado and has re-entered as it were into the primitive goodness of his generous nature. In both the power and the meaning of vast wealth is studied, what it can and what it cannot do, as I do not remember to have found it studied before. They seem the witnesses of its magic, rather than sorcerers who work it. The situation is most interesting, and the situation in Mr. Garland's book is what interests me more than the action; if I can know what people are, rather than what they do, I am the more content; and I have noted with the satisfaction which I should like to have others feel the clear conditioning of his people. In fact, his people mainly derive their importance from that. A given book of his does not present a problem for this or that character to solve; it describes a condition which shall test him. Sometimes it is an unfriendly condition, sometimes not; but the business is to show how he copes with it. In *Money Magic*, in *The Captain of the Gray-Horse Troop*, in *Cavanagh*, in *Hesper*, in *The Eagle's Heart*, it is always a sense of the conditions which remains with me. I remember the persons from them as I learned to recognize the persons from them in their full meaning. Perhaps this is so in the novels of others, but I do not think it is, and I consider Mr. Garland's novels for this reason particularly valuable as materials of social history, no less than as very entertaining personal history. One cannot read them (and if you begin on them you *must* read them) without becoming more and more convinced that it is our conditioning which determines our characters, even though it does not always determine our actions. The strong man, the good woman, grows stronger and better for the struggle with them, though I am not sure that this is what Mr. Garland is conscious of seeking to show. I dare say that he paints them, and cannot help painting them, because in his own career he has been passionately sensible of their stress even when he has not mastered all their meaning. As a singularly American artist, too, he instinctively devotes himself to the portrayal of conditions because America itself is all a novel condition.

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